



The

# Running Record



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Reading Recovery Teachers  
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### ***The Running Record* is published twice a year (fall and spring).**

Submission of articles, teaching anecdotes, and poetry are welcome; all submissions will go through a review process. Please enclose 3 copies of each submission, a photograph (non-returnable) and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for correspondence. Photos will be used on a space available basis. Send submissions to:

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## A decision-making model of Reading Recovery teaching: Figuring out *what to do when*



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People who enter training in Reading Recovery are often surprised, if not overwhelmed, with the tasks of making decisions in their teaching. Many novices seem to expect that decisions about procedures to use in lessons will be fairly clear cut, but nothing could be further from the truth (Jones, 1992). Every action of teaching during a Reading Recovery lesson represents a decision that the teacher must make for that child at a particular point in time. Looking for shortcuts or routine ways of doing things is ineffective in enabling the acceleration of children's learning.

Decision-making in Reading Recovery requires skills of observation and reflective analysis that many teachers have not had to learn in order to be good classroom teachers. This is because Reading Recovery sets the teacher a very complex task which involves the construction of a curriculum for each individual child — a curriculum that is consistently and regularly contingent upon that child's current knowledge and emerging awareness, and which is guided by the teacher's close observations, her understanding of Clay's theory of literacy acquisition, and her own experience with various paths that different children may take in the process of becoming literate (Clay, 1993b, 1998).

These decision-making processes can be compared to action research which has been described as, "a form of professional practice, a research process, and a reflective way of teaching" (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001, p. 15). The information that guides Reading Recovery teachers in their actions and choices must come from several different sources which are guided by a wide range of considerations derived from theory. This article will attempt to analyze the decision-making steps in which Reading Recovery teachers engage as they work with individual children. It will also present and explain some of the considerations and principles that guide teaching decisions that are intended to support children's learning. The aims of the paper are to increase Reading Recovery teachers' awareness of the cycle of decision-making steps that underlie good Reading Recovery teaching, and to enable them to think about the many ways they can bring their teaching into balance so that the children they serve have an increased opportunity to develop self-extending literacy learning systems.

### **A decision-making model**

Decision making begins with *observation* of the child's *current strengths, knowledge and capabilities*. The skillful teacher observes the individual child to find out what is secure knowledge, that is, what the child is able to do with accuracy and fluency, or at least with correctness and control. The teacher must also observe and make inferences about the child's ability to process information when

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engaged in reading and writing tasks. *Processing* may be defined as the ability to use information of more than one kind to solve problems quickly. Useful questions that aid the observation of processing behavior include: Does the child monitor and attempt to correct his own performance, even on simple tasks? Does he learn new letters and/or words fairly easily, or does he have great difficulty entering new information into his long-term memory? On what kinds of texts can the child attend both to meaning and some aspect of visual information on the page?

Classroom teachers do not have time or opportunity for such sensitive observation, and indeed, most children can learn under conditions that are not so focused on the individual's knowledge and needs. However, in order to initiate and enable accelerated learning for the lowest children in the classroom, a much more individually sensitive program is necessary. This is one of the major justifications for Reading Recovery as an early intervention for the lowest performing children.

Closely related, but somewhat different, is observation of the child's partial knowledge and developing awareness of new knowledge (Clay, 1998). The Reading Recovery teacher's observation skills must be sensitive enough to distinguish *emerging knowledge* from *achieved knowledge*. *Achieved knowledge* is under the child's control, for example, the ability to read and write a certain word consistently, or the ability to search all sources of information to problem-solve a new word. *Emerging knowledge* is just beginning to come into the child's notice, but she cannot use it independently or she uses it inconsistently. For example, a teacher might notice that a child is now aware of word spaces on the page (and puzzled when he doesn't match with the language message), or he is aware of the identity of a word in reading that he cannot yet write.

Another important factor to consider is any *special problems* that this learner may have. All Reading Recovery children have problems in acquiring literacy, but special problems may be

posed by factors such as limited control of English, dysfluent use of language, a strong tendency to invent text, difficulty in attending to print, etc. (Clay, 1993b).

Based upon observations of the child's achieved and emerging knowledge, and his ability to process information, the teacher puzzles over what the child is just ready to learn next. This difficult decision draws upon the teacher's understanding of Clay's theory of beginning literacy. The teacher's overriding purpose is to help this child develop a literacy learning system that becomes self-extending.

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### The Reading Recovery teacher's observation skills must be sensitive enough to distinguish *emerging knowledge* from *achieved knowledge*.

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Acquisition of strategies is all-important, but items must also be learned so that the child can use this knowledge strategically on appropriate texts. Specific areas of processing — such as hearing and recording speech sounds in sequence in writing, the ability to read fluently for meaning, the ability to recognize and respond to letters quickly, etc. — also must be considered at this decision phase.

The Reading Recovery lesson format is a great help to teacher planning, but within that framework, decisions must be made about choices and levels of books, about specific procedures, and about what to emphasize with this child. Plans are made not only for the next lesson but also for the next few lessons; all plans are made with an attitude of tentativeness and flexibility, allowing for quick revision based upon daily observations. This is a time that teachers may consult Clay's texts, particularly *Reading Recovery: A guidebook for teachers in training* (1993b), and perhaps seek advice from a colleague as well. The teacher enters each day's lesson with an intention of what the child needs to learn or learn to do with greater control in *each part* of the Reading Recovery

lesson and a plan for how she is going to enable the child to realize that intention.

The decision-making responsibility does not stop here. As the teacher implements the procedures she has chosen, she puts herself again into the role of sensitive observer of the child, but now she also has to learn to become a sensitive observer of her own teaching (a point which will be discussed below in greater detail). Reading Recovery teachers take a running record of the child's reading each day, and they also keep records of the lesson events and interactions. Most teachers add to their

records after the lesson is over, making more detailed notes about what the child was attending to and what she could do; also, they make notes about their own teaching moves during the lesson. These records are of utmost importance; they provide the means by which the teacher engages later in in-depth analysis

of child and teacher performance patterns that may give clues to acceleration or, conversely, to lack of progress.

The next step in the recursive decision-making process is *evaluation*. In addition to sensitive observation during the lesson, the teacher needs to reflect, each day, about whether the child was able to extend his or her learning as she had intended. The analysis may be brief if the child is making the forward moves the teacher had hoped and expected. But if there is limited progress, even for two or three days, the teacher needs to engage in a more careful and formal analysis of the child's responding and of the lesson interactions. In such cases, evaluation leads to new hypotheses about the child's learning and processing and a search for different or additional procedures, materials, books, and teaching strategies.

A diagram of this recursive decision-making process is presented on page 3. This is, of course, an oversimplification of the processes teachers engage in. The steps of the process as described here may overlap or intertwine and teachers go through the cycle many times in the process of teaching a child.

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## A decision-making model ...

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If the teacher becomes concerned about very limited progress after four or five weeks (and perhaps before), and *after she has engaged in thorough analysis* of the child's progress, his program, and her own teaching, it may be time to *seek assistance from others*. Clay advises in clear terms, that if a child is finding it hard to accelerate, "There is only one position to take in this case. The programme is not, or has not been, appropriately adapted to the child's needs. It is time to take a close look at possible reasons for this, and colleague comment is what the teacher should seek" (Clay 1993b, p. 56).

### How is the teaching supporting the child's learning?

An important part of the re-analysis, alone or with a colleague, is to reconsider one's assumptions and hypotheses about how the child is functioning and what might be holding him back. Clay suggests that the teacher re-examine or check on, "... your analysis of the child's difficulties, new explanations [of his difficulties] that might apply, the intactness of the reading process on easier material,

whether the child's writing behaviour is improving" (Clay, 1993b, p. 57).

But Clay stresses also the need for teachers to check on their own teaching behavior. "... Often he has learned to do something which is interfering with his progress, and he may have learned it from the way you have been teaching" (Clay, 1993b, p. 57). The question of how the teaching is supporting the child's learning is important to consider in working with all Reading Recovery children, but it is critical in those cases in which the child is making poor progress.

The goal for all children, of course, is that they develop a literacy learning process or "... self-extending system for literacy learning that includes reading and writing" (Clay, 1991, p. 325). Key indications that this is occurring include self-initiated monitoring, searching, self-correction, and other kinds of active problem-solving strategies. However, we expect also that children will be able to work on increasingly more difficult texts with fewer appeals for help; that the searching, checking, and correcting activities will become more rapid and efficient; and, that the child's problem-solving will

begin to use more advanced strategies such as analogies and tentative decisions awaiting further information to be discovered later in the text (Clay, 1991).

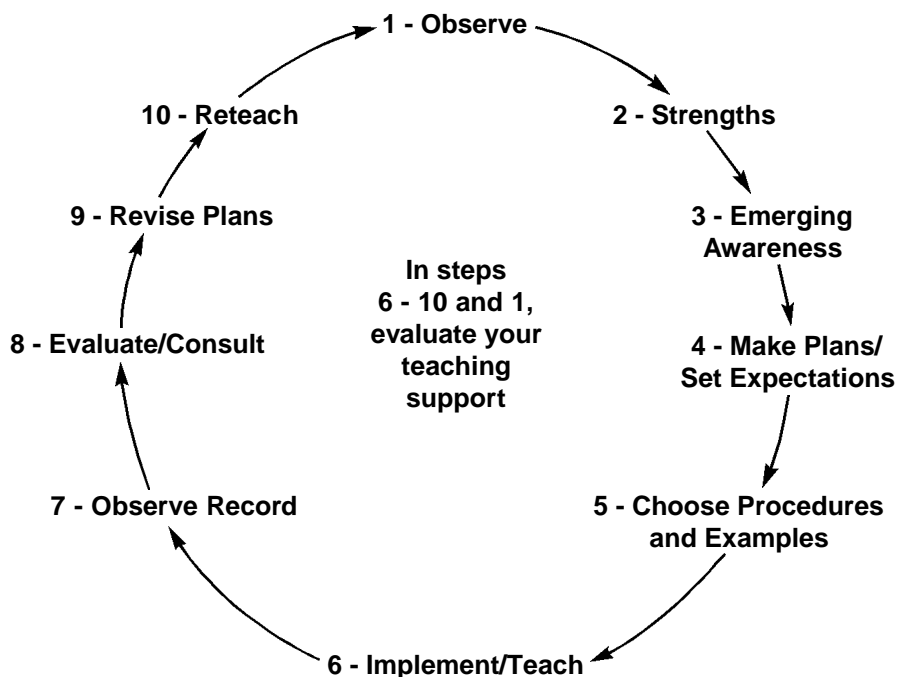
Some kinds of teaching, although well-intended, can inhibit this from happening in many ways. Some would be obvious, such as doing everything for the child and not allowing independence. Others are more subtle traps that teachers may fall into unwittingly, sometimes for only one of the children they are teaching. The following suggestions are not complete, but they capture a large percentage of the issues I have personally observed in my own teaching and on the many visits I have made to teachers over the past 10 years.

One of the first questions to ask might be, *Are you keeping the learning easy enough so that the child continues to be an active, productive learner?* Accuracy is not the only indication of book difficulty. The text should require some "reading work" on the part of the child, but this reading work may actually occur in accurate reading. We can often be surprised by the amount of psychological and physical effort that may go into a child's accurate reading of a text. It is easy to fall into the pattern of making the learning too difficult. For example, a teacher might choose non-patterned text to foster greater attention to print (for a child who relies on memory in reading patterned text) and end up with choices that are too difficult for the child. Once text level becomes too difficult, other things will need to be sorted out after introduction of the book that will not have been worked out in the first reading or after the running record taken the following day. This may lead to book choices in familiar reading becoming too hard and, hence, fluent reading disappears. Also, the amount of work in writing may have become too great. Perhaps this has occurred for those children who seem deliberately to compose simple sentences and object to writing more.

According to Clay, "Two kinds of learning must be kept in balance: on the one hand there is performing with success on familiar material which strengthens the decision-making processes of the reader

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### A problem-solving model of teaching



## A decision-making model ...

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as he works across text, and on the other there is independent problem-solving on new and interesting texts with supportive teaching. . . ” (Clay, 1993b, p. 9). What is harder to determine is how hard the text reading should be during the time that reading work occurs. Instructional level is judged to be in the range of 90% to 94% accuracy; yet Clay’s early research demonstrated that self-correction level is also an important indicator that processing is going on, and that the readers who progressed well typically read at 95% accuracy or greater (Clay, 1982).

Another important question is, *is the teaching stressing accuracy or item learning at the expense of strategic processing?* It is difficult to divest ourselves of the belief that accurate reading is important for learning progress, so we often find ourselves compelled to bring attention to errors that the child would (at his current level) not be able to detect himself. Some teachers retain a tacit belief that children learn to read primarily by acquiring items of knowledge (words and/or sound symbol associations). This belief can lead the teacher to direct the child’s attention rather narrowly to visual information in print rather than observing and building upon the child’s emerging awareness of the many aspects of print such as book organization, story structure and meaning, relationships among oral and written words, and many other dimensions of literacy and language.

The imbalances I have mentioned so far tend to lead to obtrusive teaching practices — teaching moves that tend to usurp the child’s notice and intent and move him or her to a somewhat passive approach to learning. Being kind but too helpful, or talking much more than the child can attend to, are other ways that teachers can unwittingly foster dependence and passivity.

But there are ways of teaching that lead to imbalances in the opposite direction as well. Teaching can many times not be obtrusive enough. Allowing a child to persist with a habit or practice that interferes with learning is counter-productive as well. Teachers may need to teach strenuously to get a shift in a child’s performance, or to get the child

to work hard enough to learn a word, or to pay attention to punctuation, or to consistently follow the directional rules of English. The tricky issue, of course, is how to judge when to teach hard and insistently, when to teach with a light touch, and when to leave the child alone. Although advice to cover all cases is impossible to give, if a teacher is reflective about her teaching, and if she becomes a careful observer and problem-solver, she will be more capable of judging when these moves tend to help or hinder learning.

Teaching may fall short of supporting learning or may actually interfere with

acceleration and learning progress in many more ways. However, rather than discussing further possibilities, let me offer instead a set of questions (see the Table, below) that teachers might use in analyzing themselves as Reading Recovery teachers or in analyzing the teaching support they are giving to a particular child who is finding it hard to accelerate. These questions are not the only ones that might be considered, nor would any one person need to think about all of them. They are offered only as a resource to remind us of the many ways that our teaching may go astray

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**Table. Questions to help you analyze yourself as a Reading Recovery teacher**

1. Do you use a problem-solving approach to your teaching? That is, do you observe carefully, analyze children’s strengths, analyze notes and records, use the Guidebook and other resources to plan instruction, observe results, and re-plan as needed?
2. Is your teaching supporting the development of strategies and problem-solving, or is it over-focused on acquisition of items of knowledge?
3. Are you stressing accuracy at the expense of strategic problem-solving, even when the child responds with only approximate responses?
4. Are you observing children very carefully and following their notice and their notions?
5. Are you using the lesson format and procedures in the Guidebook as intended?
6. Are you prompting to achieve balanced attention to meaning, structure and visual information?
7. Are you observing progress in your children and taking action if it is unsatisfactory?
8. Have you helped children establish a solid repertoire of known items?
9. Are you fostering independence in all parts of the lesson, particularly independent use of strategic problem-solving in reading and writing?
10. Do your lessons reflect a balance between fluency and reading work?
11. Are you keeping the learning easy enough so that the child continues to be an active, productive learner?
12. Are you working with the classroom teacher and home to support learning?
13. Do you have a sincere commitment to the role of early intervention specialist:
  - Do you have productive, 30-minute lessons daily with every child?
  - Do you try to focus your teaching to make progress every day?
  - Are you concerned and take action about slow student progress?
  - Do you request and use suggestions from others?
  - Are you determined to succeed with every child?



## A decision-making model ...

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and become part of the problem that stands in the way of a child's accelerated learning.

Reflecting and analyzing one's own teaching is not always a comfortable thing to do, and it certainly is not easy. Overlooking problems is most likely to occur when teachers attempt to assess their own teaching because the perceptions and judgments are generated from the same belief system that underlies the teaching performance. Clay advises teachers,

You are likely to have some blind spots in these areas and the opinions of colleagues could be most useful for the readjustment of your programme. It has been one of the values of the Inservice Training sessions that teachers have been able to pool their collective wisdom on their most puzzling pupils (1993b, p. 57).

In seeking assistance of colleagues, teachers need to be careful not to relinquish personal responsibility for analysis and reflection. Rather than requesting or expecting colleagues or a teacher leader to problem-solve *for* them, teachers will be requesting others to problem-solve *with* them, and then only after they have made a continuous and sincere effort to understand the child and the teaching program for that child through their own analysis.

Reading Recovery teaching will always be challenging and difficult because it involves analysis and problem-solving of the most difficult learning cases, each of which requires skillful, daily decision-making based upon an individual child's unique needs. However, the challenge, and the ability to succeed with many children in the face of that challenge, is what is both rewarding and interesting about Reading Recovery teaching. Certainly Reading Recovery teachers don't stay in this program for the opportunity to read books like *Nick's Glasses* (Cachemaille, 1982) or *Mrs. Wishy-Washy* (Cowley, 1980) fifty to one hundred times!

Through their initial training and through their continuing professional development, Reading Recovery teachers come to understand and use the decision-making processes that this article has attempted to describe. Teachers need to realize that continued improvement in their teaching effectiveness depends upon their ability and commitment to improve as analysts and problem-solvers of children's learning and of their own teaching. Clay's work, and the work of hundreds of Reading Recovery teachers, has shown us what is possible, and if there is any possibility of bringing a child back onto a successful learning path, then we have both a moral and professional obligation to find out how to do it and to make it happen.

Solving the learning problems of the children we see in Reading Recovery can be extremely difficult. Yet every time teachers succeed in achieving a break through with children, they increase their own understanding and ability to teach, which brings benefits for the many children still to come.

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## Editor's Corner



Judith C. Neal, Editor — *The Running Record*

This issue of *The Running Record* features several articles of particular relevance to the thousands of Reading Recovery teachers who began their training year this fall. Noel Jones' lead article elaborates upon the complexity of the kind of teaching we learn to do when we "learn Reading Recovery." Emily Rodgers answers the question, "Why sit in a circle?" by providing rationale for understanding a fundamental aspect of Reading Recovery training sessions. I am especially pleased to feature an article by teacher leader Dawn Osborne on linking sound sequence with letter sequence — the first article on Making and Breaking to be accepted and published in *The Running Record*. And, of course, there is more, including poetry and personal-interest stories of experiences related to serving children and schools in Reading Recovery.

Once again, I express my great appreciation for the wonderful contributions that come my way for possible publication here. Please continue to send your articles, poems, teaching anecdotes, and newsworthy information about Reading Recovery in your school (including honors or other recognition awarded to Reading Recovery teachers).

Happy fall! And to Reading Recovery teachers-in-training: welcome to *The Running Record* and the Reading Recovery Council of North America.

## Collaborative inquiry in Reading Recovery, or “Why sit in a circle?”



**Emily Rodgers**  
Trainer of Teacher Leaders  
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**O**ne unique feature of Reading Recovery training and subsequent professional

development is that participants sit in a circle to discuss lessons that have been communally observed. No tables are used; everyone simply pulls up a chair in a circle to have a discussion. Usually a small table is in the center of the circle upon which materials from the lessons are placed for quick and easy reference during the discussion.

This physical arrangement often seems unusual to people who are unfamiliar with Reading Recovery training and even to those who have been trained. They ask, “Why sit in a circle?” or, “Can’t we sit at a round table?” The rationale for sitting in a circle without a table for discussion can be better understood by considering these two ideas: (1) the role of language in learning, and (2) the way conversation is affected by the physical positioning of the participants.

### The role of language in learning, or “Can’t I just sit and listen?”

An African proverb, “Ma mona mbwa mafila kumbundu,” translates this way: “What the dog sees, dies in his heart.” By contrast, what humans see lives forever. Why? Because of the power of language. Animals can learn from one another without the benefit of language, but each new generation is essentially bound to start over, to re-discover the same things that their ancestors already learned (notwithstanding the slow changes brought about by evolution). Birds don’t leave behind manuals that describe how to build nests, for example. Instead, their basic plan for nest building has gone unchanged over many, many years. Humans, meanwhile, have made progress in leaps and bounds due in large part to our ability to use language, to share and build on the ideas of others. As Halliday observes (Wells, 2000), “*Language is the*

*essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge*” (p. 73, italics in original).

In Reading Recovery, we recognize the power of language to scaffold or lift learning, making it possible for us to learn more with assistance than we would be capable of by acting alone (see Vygotsky (1978) for a full description of the zone of proximal development). We pay special attention to our language when tutoring children, knowing that our language becomes a tool for the child to monitor and evaluate his reading attempts until he develops flexible plans of action. For example, I’ve heard a child say, “That didn’t make sense,” when she realized she had made an error while reading. It’s no accident that this is just what I had been saying to her when she had neglected meaning previously. She had come to use my language as a tool to check on herself. Very soon, this overt language disappeared as she developed her own inner language to check this source of information.

The same is true for adult learning: language is the key to the process. Reading Recovery training offers many opportunities to use language to take us beyond our individual understandings about teaching—whether it’s during a lesson being taught “behind the glass,” a discussion afterwards, a school visit, or a colleague visit. In these settings, particularly when viewing lessons being taught behind the glass, we are encouraged to “say what you are thinking,” to “share a thought with the whole group,” or to “say more about that,” as opposed to sitting quietly and thoughtfully. This is because through our use of language, we can not only extend and refine our own thinking, but we can also create “chains of reasoning” as Lyons has put it. In this way, the contributions of several participants build on one another, lifting the *whole group* to a new level of understanding (Lyons, 1994).

The discussion in the circle after the lessons also provides a powerful opportunity for language to become a tool for

learning. In fact, this “conversation” is very similar to what Lindfors calls “collaborative inquiry.” She defines inquiry as “*a language act in which one attempts to elicit another’s help in going beyond his or her present understanding*” (Lindfors, 1999, p. ix, italics in original).

I cannot think of a better way to describe what we do in circle discussions. We are engaging in collaborative inquiry in order to scaffold one another beyond our present understandings. Using Lindfors’ perspective, we can see that the questions we ask are invitations to others to help us understand more, and we respond to the invitations of others for the same reason. Each person has a responsibility to articulate ideas, to actively try to understand each other, to follow a line of inquiry started by someone else and to stay with it. *Exploring* is key, not necessarily *answering* (Lindfors, 1999).

Collaborative inquiry cannot occur if each participant pursues her own ideas, ignoring the questions and comments of others. Nor does it work if some participants do not take part at all.

Language is critical to the process of learning across all dimensions of Reading Recovery, but as we all know, it may not happen easily. In fact, it can be greatly affected by something as seemingly benign as the way we position ourselves when we talk. For this reason, how we sit for discussions after the lessons taught behind the one-way mirror is important to consider.

### The effects of the physical positioning of participants on conversation, or “Why sit in a circle?”

We are all aware that the way we converse with friends is likely to be different from the way we talk with our supervisors. For example, when talking to someone in a position of authority, we probably listen more carefully for our turn to speak so as not to talk at the same time as that person does. Yet we usually

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would not mind interrupting a friend, parent, or sibling to have our say. In addition, the words we choose to express ourselves to our bosses are different from those we use to converse with our friends. These features of talk are supported by research. What else can we learn from research about conversation?

One critical feature of conversation has to do with the physical positioning of the participants. McHoul examined the organization of turn-taking in classroom talk and noted that the *configuration* between participants is very important. He states,

Intuitively we regard formal situations as those in which the persons taking part have allocated positions: the chairperson sits at the head of the members of the board who sit at either side of the table; the speech-maker stands elevated above his audience who are ranged in front of him in rows or at random; debaters sit facing one another . . . (1978, p. 183).

There is no "head of a table" in a circle (unless the formation is really an oval!) and therefore, no one holds more right to talk than any one else. Any other formation, including a circle with a table, automatically sets someone apart as the *leader* of the discussion. In circle discussions little need exists to acknowledge a single person as having the most capability of extending the learning of others. The nature of collaborative inquiry implies that, ". . . participants

with relatively little expertise can learn with and from each other as well as from those with greater expertise" (Wells, 2000, p. 56).

McHoul goes on to say that research supports the "common sense" notion that the way participants in conversation face each other will have a bearing on the way they interact. Kendon (in McHoul, 1978) asserts,

Configurations in which the participants arrange themselves in a circle are probably those in which the participation rights of all the members are defined as equal. In configurations where one or several members are spatially differentiated from the others so that the pattern approaches a triangular, semi-circular or parallelogrammatic form, participation rights are no longer equal (1978, p. 184).

So, a circle may be the best design for discussion because it facilitates the participation of all members of the conversation: everyone has an equal right to talk. Any other arrangement, such as a rectangle or a triangle, compromises that right and has the potential to limit discussion.

Sometimes we think that a new group of people in training might be resistant to sitting in a circle and that it will be a difficult shift for them to make because it is so unusual. However, many teachers welcome the opportunity to sit this way; they get the message that they have a right and a responsibility to take part in

discussions. This became obvious to me one day recently as I listened to a Reading Recovery teacher leader beginning to explain to a training class of teachers why they were sitting in a circle. She had just started a very good explanation when one of the teachers spoke up and simply said, "We're equals."

The emphasis on language as a tool for learning in Reading Recovery is supported by the theoretical works of Vygotsky (1978) and Luria (1979; 1982). In fact, as Wells (2000) has noted, one feature of the zone of proximal development that has complete scholarly agreement is the central role of language in learning. With all of our investment in opportunities for teachers to talk and support each other's learning, it makes sense that we would also take steps to ensure that their physical arrangement during discussions is one that encourages the lively, collaborative talk in which everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.

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## All in the family: Reflections on Reading Recovery

**Jan Schall**  
Reading Recovery Teacher Leader  
Yucaipa, California

**H**ere I am, standing chest deep in Lake Crowley holding a fly fishing rod.

"Twelve o'clock, twelve o'clock," my coach chants as he guides my arm and I watch my line furl out across the water. I have never been fly-fishing before, but my avid sportsman son has taken the family on a vacation to the California Sierra Nevada, and not to be left behind, I find myself decked out in waders and boots, sloshing through the water in search of the illusive trout.

My coach is helping me, guiding my untrained arm through the motions designed to present the fly to the trout in an appealing, natural manner. I am struggling to take on this new learning. As my mind wanders and I gaze at the beautiful mountains that surround me I think. . . This must be just what children feel like when they come to Reading Recovery.

Teacher as coach, support through modeling and language, working side by side with the learner, observing behavior, the unique relationship I now have with my son. . . these are the things I am thinking about as I stand here in the water.

I am a Reading Recovery teacher leader and my son is a Reading Recovery teacher. This common experience and shared understanding is one of the most cherished and interesting aspects of our adult friendship.

Actually, when I think about it, I almost laugh at how many of our conversations are made possible only by this unusual bond we share. We combine daily events with the language of the guidebook.

The phone rings at 7:00 a.m. Dad groans as I say, "Hello."

"What's up?" our son asks.

"How are you?" I ask, clearly hearing that he is on his cell phone on the way to school.

"Fine, but the water heater won't stay on and my cable hook-up isn't working so I can't get on the Internet. . . but, Mom, I'm worried about Carlos. I don't think he is looking across words. I don't know if he even understands directionality within a word. Yesterday he was reading, *A Birthday Cake for Ben* (Rigby PM, Level 3). Do you know it?" Of course I know this book, and so we talk about Carlos and think of ways to support his learning because we

share a common language and developing theory about how children learn to read.

"You know, Mom, I'm also really having trouble getting Robbie to be more

fluent. He is just so slow. I think I need you to come and visit. Why don't you come down and we can work with all my kids and then have a chance to talk about them."

My children have taught me many of the things I know: how to do e-mail, navigate the Internet, drive fast on the freeway, not to mention learning the rules of soccer and the sounds of modern music. Now my son is teaching me about teaching children to read.

I sit beside him during a colleague visit and watch him as the child comes to a "tricky word." With a quickness that I don't seem to have, my son sees a connection to something the child knows. Magnetic letters appear in order to form a word, chunks of letters are revealed, a connection is made, and successful reading proceeds. WOW, I think. That's how it's supposed to look! I need to work on making connections from new to known. Learning

supported by the teacher — quickly in and quickly out — connections made before I had even thought of them.

This is MY SON, the Reading Recovery teacher!

These are cherished moments for me. The insights and powerful teaching models provided through Reading Recovery create a common bond among teachers throughout the world as we work to bring literacy to all children.



But especially significant to me, as a mother, is when I share these experiences with my son. We sit together, observe and think, talk and problem-solve to enable the accelerated progress of our students.

So here I am, still standing in the river, no luck with the trout, when I notice my son wading over, perhaps to give me some words of encouragement, I think, and then he says, "Mom, did you know. . . fly-fishing is just like Reading Recovery. . ."



## Catch and release

**Aaron Schall**  
Reading Recovery Teacher  
National City, California

**M**y hands still trembled from the battle that ensued just seconds ago. Delicately I reached down and pinched the imitation Mayfly between my thumb and first finger and with a gentle twist, removed the hook from the upper lip of a magnificent 20-inch wild rainbow trout. As it swam away, tired from a short but courageous battle, the blurred image of the fish transformed into Tyler, one of my Reading Recovery



students, as he walked out of my Reading Recovery room for the last time.

The exhilaration and adrenaline I felt just moments after releasing my biggest trout caught to date was the same that ran through me the day when Tyler and I knew that he had developed a self-extending system and was able to tackle various and increasingly difficult text with a high level of success on his own. I watched Tyler as he entered his classroom with shoulders a little

straighter and head held noticeably higher. As he disappeared, the closing door slowly faded into the reflection of a darkening California sky. Then I realized that Reading Recovery and all good teaching, for that matter, are just like catch and release fly fishing.

Good, effective teaching begins with careful observation and authentic assessment. A highly trained, expert teacher will then use this information to guide their instruction. This is just like the expert fly fisher crouched in the tall grass, watching, waiting, and observing. What insects are the fish eating today? Are they eating below the surface or from the top? Where will my shadow be and how is the current going to affect the drift of my fly? All of this and more must be carefully considered before the first cast is made so as not to risk spooking the entire fish population upon first attempt.

Good, effective teaching is not the adoption of a packaged program to be followed year after year regardless of the differences invariably present among children, just as a catch and release fly fisherman is not your typical weekend warrior loudly stomping to the edge of the lake with a cooler of Budweiser, radio and lawn chair in tow. Oblivious to the larger, wild trout silently sipping insects from just under the surface film of the water, this angler molds a ball of colorful dough around his hook and tosses it aimlessly into the water. The fishing pole is then leaned up against a rock or post, leaving a lone bell at the tip to signal the fisherman, most likely now asleep. If a fish is caught it is most certainly a product of chance and not due to any skill of the angler! But undoubtedly, later that night, this very same person can be heard boasting of their conquest of a fish which was determined to end up on a dinner plate.

As Reading Recovery teachers we “catch” our students with skillful lessons designed around their strengths that include lots of praise and meaningful stories. We strive to remain at the cutting edge of their learning, and we resist falling into set patterns and comfort zones. The fly fisherman identifies new insects most coveted by the toughest to catch fish and modifies his casts and techniques so that he may catch fish previously thought unreachable. Just so, as Reading Recovery teachers, we modify our teaching to catch the toughest to teach children by presenting them with appropriate levels of support and texts to match.

We may forget this, especially when we know that many other fish will be caught, that many children will be taught and at the end of the day we will be able to talk about those other successes over the dinner table. But effective teachers know that we can’t “hang our hat” on children so easy to teach. Our focus is on that tough-to-catch fish of a lifetime, the one tucked under the bank, hidden in the weeds, unresponsive to common offerings, longing for something better, something expertly chosen that is familiar to his palette and which makes a connection with him as it is presented.

As Reading Recovery teachers, every child who walks through our door is that fish of a lifetime, ready to

be presented with appropriate instruction tailored to his needs. Once “hooked,” strategies are built until a self-extending system develops whereupon the

child is “released” back into the classroom environment, much like the trout that gracefully slides through my fingers as it returns to its own place in the lake.



## Communicating how words work



**Dawn Osborne**  
Reading Recovery Teacher Leader  
Dallas, Texas

“**L**anguage is a major cultural tool that enables us to think logically and to

learn new behaviors. It influences more than just the content that we know; it also impacts thinking and the acquisition of new knowledge” (Bedrova & Leong, 1996, p. 95). Careful consideration and utilization of effective language practices can increase the power of the linking sound sequence with letter sequence (Making and Breaking) experience in the Reading Recovery lesson framework.

As Reading Recovery teachers, we introduce children to the many and complex ways in which words work across the Reading Recovery lesson. As Clay (1993) explains,

Slowly, throughout the reading and writing work of the Reading Recovery lessons the child is introduced to different ways of

- constructing a new word in writing
- or working out a new word in reading (p. 43).

The Making and Breaking portion of the lesson consists of a mere one to three minutes of the entire thirty-minute lesson. Yet, it has the potential to provide a powerful reciprocal link between reading and writing. Teachers frequently discuss the many ways in which letters can be manipulated to make learning how words work ‘come alive’ for the child. However, we may have often neglected the importance of communication with the child during Making and Breaking. This article will discuss the many facets of language within the Making and Breaking portion of the lesson. The following are key ideas to be considered as we work to improve our instruction of Reading Recovery children.

**Explain principles.** “. . . Its [Making and Breaking] intent is to help the child to understand the process of word construction, how words work, and how he can get help from words he knows to use on new words he needs to know”

(Clay, 1993, p. 44). The teacher’s language must explain concepts of how words work as opposed to individual words or lists of words. It is important for the teacher to use more than one example to illustrate her teaching. In this way, the teacher can, “. . . beware that learning how words work does not degenerate into *teaching words* for that is not the purpose of this part of the lesson. . .” (Clay, 1993, p. 46). For example, if the teacher wants the child to understand the concept of changing the onset of a word, she may demonstrate by changing the onsets of two different words (e. g., *look* to *took* and *dad* to *sad*). On the other hand, a less effective example would be changing the onset of just one word (e. g., *look* to make *took*, *book*, *cook*, and *hook*). The use of a single example leads the child to think about how one word can be changed to make a new word, a much narrower concept than in the former example where the child learns that he can change the onset of a known word to help him read or write an unknown word. Likewise, the teacher’s explanation must reflect this much broader concept.

**Use consistent language across the lesson.** When explaining concepts to children, teachers need to use terms consistently. For instance, the terms *front*, *beginning*, and *first letter* are all clear and concise ways of describing the same part of a word. However, if the teacher uses these terms interchangeably during her explanation, the child may become confused. Choose one term that the child easily understands so he will know where to look when the teacher refers to a particular position. The following example illustrates this concept: “We can change the beginning letter to make a new word. Take this letter and change the beginning of this word to make it say ———.”

**Use explicit language and simple vocabulary.** “Make your actions and the children’s actions verbally explicit. Label your own actions as you carry them out. Label the child’s actions for him as they occur. The more you tie language to

action, the more you will help children use language to facilitate learning” (Bedrova, 1996, p. 105). Avoid using vague, technical, or unusual language that is not easily transferred to the child when explaining how words work. For example, “I like the way you visually scanned that word,” can be simplified and clarified by saying something more like, “You changed the beginning letter to make a *new* word. Good!”

Concise, simple, and explicit language will help the child learn not only how words work but will also enable him to help himself understand how to think about words in other parts of the lesson. Wood (1998) explains, “When we suggest, remind, prompt or whatever, we are providing insights into processes that usually take place ‘in our head’” (p. 98). He notes further that “. . . Vygotsky argues that such external and social activities are gradually internalized by the child as he comes to regulate his own intellectual activity” (p. 98). As Clay (1993) explains when discussing the verbalization of the process of checking on words, “. . . It seems legitimate to encourage a child to verbalise a strategy or a principle or a rule-like consistency because these have more general application. They have generative value” (p. 43). However, Clay cautions that, “*It is a tactic that could be overworked and could interfere with the automatic responding that goes with fluency*” (p. 43, emphasis hers).

**Demonstrate first.** It is important for the teacher to physically demonstrate and verbally explain the concept simultaneously. As Clay (1993) notes, “First we have to help the child to understand the task” (p. 44). With each new concept, the teacher manipulates the magnetic letters while explaining what she is doing, before asking the child to do likewise with a similar word. Notice how the teacher demonstrates making the word *cat* in the sample teacher-student interaction on page 12.

**Explain why.** To make even clearer the usefulness of what is learned in

*continued on next page*

## Communicating how words work ...

*continued from previous page*

Making and Breaking, the teacher must explain to the child that this will help him figure out new words when he is reading and writing. This places the link in the child's mind for later in the lesson when the teacher may want him to use the process learned in Making and Breaking to problem-solve in reading and writing. This is demonstrated in the last sentence of the sample teaching interaction on page 12.

**Begin with the child's known.** Clay (1993) explains that it is important for the teacher to, "Create a link between what the child knows and something new and go back to what the child knows in order to make a link to another new word" (p. 44). Beginning with the child's known is a crucial point made by Clay (1993) in each part of the lesson. For example, in taking words apart in reading, she suggests that, "The aim is to have the child use what he knows. . ." (p. 47). In order to write a word, Clay (1993)

again suggests, "Sometimes you have to 'make it like another word you know' . . ." (p. 35). In Making and Breaking,

teachers select words from the child's writing vocabulary chart to demonstrate a concept since these words are known by the child ". . . in all its detail . . ." (Clay, 1993, p. 27). See the example on page 12 where the teacher begins with a known word.

**Use reciprocal language.** ". . . The teacher must remember to direct the child to use what he knows in reading when he is writing and vice versa. . ." (Clay, 1993, p. 11). Likewise, the teacher must assist the child to make links to understand that what he learns in Making and Breaking can be of help to him in his attempts to problem-solve in reading and writing. Clay (1993) makes clear that in reading children must learn to go from letters to sounds, while in

writing they must be able to go from sounds to letters. Both ways can be attended to during Making and Breaking by manipulation of the language we use and the activities attempted.

For example, when teaching a child how to change the onset of words, the teacher might prompt the child to go from letters to sounds by asking the child to, "Add *c* to the beginning of *at* and read the new word." In this example, the teacher has named the letter and asked the child to determine the sound to read the word. Using the same example, while manipulating the language to demonstrate going from sounds to letters, the teacher may ask the child, "What would we add to the beginning of *at* to make *cat*?" Now the teacher has provided the sound while asking the child to provide the letter.

Consider carefully what the child needs to learn in addition to the concept of onset and rime. The teacher must

**... the teacher must assist the child to make links to understand that what he learns in Making and Breaking can be of help to him in his attempts to problem-solve in reading and writing.**

demonstrate that the reciprocity of sounds to letters in writing and letters to sounds in reading can also be learned in Making and

Breaking. By manipulating her language, the task she demonstrates, and the task that she asks the child to perform, the teacher enables the child to learn how to proceed from letters to sounds or sounds to letters.

**Consider the child's Zone of Proximal Development.** The teacher's level of support for Making and Breaking will consider the child's Zone of Proximal Development, a concept developed by Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978) to indicate the discrepancy between what the child is able to perform independently and what the child is able to perform with assistance. As the child becomes more adept at a task, the teacher's language must change

*continued on next page*

## That you are literate

**Glenn G. Coats**  
Reading Recovery Teacher  
Riegelsville, Pennsylvania

You have the gift  
or is it the curse  
to turn your ability  
to read  
on and off  
like a light switch.

In the principal's office  
you read  
one word at a time  
as if  
you are looking them up  
one by one  
in a Spanish-English  
dictionary;  
the principal will ask,  
her sentences are  
broken  
is there something wrong?

I have heard  
you click off all lights  
in the classroom,  
playing a game of  
see what happens if  
I don't do a blessed thing,  
see how long the teacher  
lets me sit here  
like a gray rock,  
never even blinking  
like a frog.

Because of this game  
this **no-I-cannot-do-it**,  
they are keeping you back  
one more year  
all because of the ability  
you choose to hide  
under your hat  
like a rabbit.

Is it fair to show  
only me  
the truth that you can  
read?  
If I cry it out in the hallways,  
she reads, she reads,  
no one will  
believe it.



## Would you, could you, teach me how?

(with thanks and acknowledgement to Dr. Seuss, *Green Eggs and Ham*)

**Liz Ottery**  
Reading Recovery Teacher  
Portage, Wisconsin

I could not read.  
I would not write.

Not with my mother or my father.  
Not in my class, not in my room.  
Just slow, all my teachers presumed.

Would you, could you, teach me how?  
Would you, could you, do it now?

Would you, could you, help me know  
Is it 'b' or is it 'd'?  
Is it 'w' or is it 'm'?  
I want to know their names, all of them.

Would you, could you, show me how  
To match the words, cross-check the cues?  
I'll try that again to have it make sense.  
Soon, my parents will come for a conference.

Could I read it here or there?  
Could I write it everywhere?  
On the board, on the table,  
In the sand, or on the carpet.  
Then I know I won't forget it.

Could you show me some more books?  
I'd really like to take a look.  
Baby Bear, Father Bear,  
Mother Bear, too,  
I'll read and read them all again  
Until I've read them through!

I do so want to write and read,  
And all your prompts I've learned to heed.  
"Try that again." "Read it like talking."  
"Could it be 'house' or 'home'?"  
Each day we read. Each day we write.  
We talk, we laugh. . .  
I'm leaping levels on my graph!

I could not read.  
I could not write.  
I would not try.  
But you stood by.

You taught me what I needed to learn,  
And for more knowledge now I yearn.  
I know I'm quite intelligent.  
Some day I could even be President!

You could, I would.  
You taught me how.

You could, I would.  
We did it.  
WOW!

## Communicating how words work ...

*continued from previous page*

to allow him to become more independent. Yet the teacher's level of assistance must become more supportive again as the child moves into working with new concepts or activities that are more complex. The exchange between the teacher and the child in the Figure illustrates this concept. Notice how the teacher uses language to lend heavy support while the child is learning a new task. Then she is able to withdraw some support, allowing more independence as the child's ability to perform the task increases and he approaches a new level of proximal development.

Language is a critical element in the reading and writing portions of Reading Recovery lessons. When planning Making and Breaking, Reading Recovery teachers think about and note on the lesson record the level of

language support the child may require.

Also, they keep in mind and note the specific principle about how words work that is being taught in addition to the words that they will use to teach the principle. These practices help keep the focus of our teaching during Making and Breaking on a conceptual level as opposed to an item level of instruction.

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### A conversation during Making and Breaking

*In the example used below, the teacher's focus is on the principle of adding and changing the onset of a word, one of several ways that "words work" as presented by Clay (1993).*

**Teacher** (showing magnetic letters on the magnetic board): This is a word you know, *at* (running finger under word as she reads). Look at the word. Say it slowly and run your finger under it (p. 44).

**Child:** *At*.

**Teacher:** I can make a new word by adding a letter to the beginning. (Adds *c* to beginning.) *Cat* (runs finger under word while reading). Run your finger under it and say it.

**Child** (running finger under word): *Cat*.

**Teacher:** Good. Now I can turn it back into *at* (removes *c* and reads). Now you read it.

**Child:** *At*.

**Teacher:** Good. Now you add the letter to the beginning of *at* and read the new word.

**Child** (adds *c* to beginning): *Cat*.

**Teacher:** Now take the letter off the beginning and turn it back into *at*. Read it.

**Child** (removes *c* and reads): *At*.

*The child now understands the task, hence the Zone of Proximal Development is changed as does the teacher's language support.*

**Teacher:** Good job. This is another word you know. (Shows magnetic letters representing *and*.) Say it slowly and run your finger under it.

**Child** (runs finger under word): *And*.

**Teacher:** Can you make *and* into *land*?

**Child** (adds *l* to *and*): *Land*.

**Teacher:** Very good. How did you turn *and* into *land*?

**Child:** I put a letter on the beginning.

**Teacher:** Yes, you made a new word by adding a letter to the beginning. That can help you when you read and write, too!

## If you give a kid a book

(with acknowledgement and thanks to Laura Numeroff,  
*If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*)

**Martha Blankenship**  
Reading Recovery Teacher  
Riverton, Wyoming

If you give a kid a book, he's going to ask you how to read it: *fast, fun, and fluent!*

When you teach him how to read, he'll probably ask you for "echoes" so he can learn how to find what he knows in different places (knowing this is helpful when he only has a small repertoire of responding). He'll hope for heaps of confirmation and praise, even resorting to 'head bobbing' to see if you are there with him.

When he listens to himself read, he might notice and initiate self-correcting because he sees that something is wrong and calls up his own resources for working on a solution. Then he'll want to make it "look and sound right" when rereading familiar books, making sure he reads with phrasing, fluency, and meaning. He'll probably develop some effective word-solving strategies using making and breaking, taking words apart on the run, substituting initial consonants, onsets and rimes, and using chunks of information and analogies. While he's learning to take words apart in reading, he'll start orchestrating complex processing on just difficult enough texts and then accelerating!

He might get carried away and end up noticing the reciprocity between reading and writing as well!

When he's done, he'll probably want to read behind-the-glass for teachers in training. You'll have to fix up a little basket for him with books, a writing journal, and a 30-minute timer. He'll settle in and make himself comfortable behind-the-glass, "ace" the running record and then he may ask you for confirmation and praise. (You'll show delight at his spontaneous relating of "this" to "that" because what the child knows and what the child can get to is where the teacher goes — hurrah!). Then talk with him for a story and he'll ask for paper, markers and correction tape. He'll write a story, including hearing and recording sounds in words. . . an interesting story, not starting with, "I like." When the story is finished, he'll want the cut-up version to put it together. Then he'll want to read a new book which means he'll need a powerful book introduction. Looking at the new book will remind him that he's controlling lots of strategies and a high frequency vocabulary for reading and writing.

So he'll ask for a higher level book and then he's going to want to read it. . . *fast, fun, and fluent!*

Next deadline for *The Running Record*:

# January 20, 2001

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## What I *can* do

**Debbie Sweatman**  
Reading Recovery Teacher  
Gallatin, Missouri

I **can** be trained to learn new skills. . .  
I **can't** be an expert in one year.

I **can** guide students to be independent learners. . .  
I **can't** do it for them.

I **can** take a running record. . .  
I **can't** do it neatly.

I **can** write the letters  
msv very small. . .  
I **can't** analyze errors well (yet).

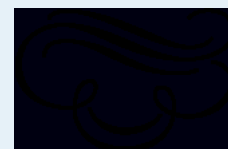
I **can** "follow the child,"  
I **can't** always "find him."

I **can** learn from my colleagues,  
I **can't** learn all the answers alone.

I **can** fill out lesson plans, attendance sheets, scan forms, observation summaries, discontinuation forms, and questionnaires. . .  
I **can't** increase the hours in a day.

I **can** enjoy my job each day. . .  
I **can't** reach enough children.

I **can't** change the world. . .  
But, I **can** make a difference, one child at a time.





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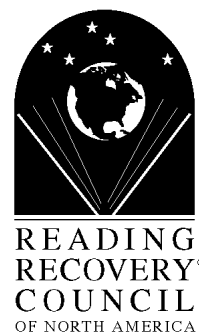
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## THE LAST WORD

### A good try

**Barbara Snyder**  
**Reading Recovery Teacher**  
**Glastonbury, Connecticut**

Guiseppe was writing his sentence and was working on the word *cow*. I asked him if he knew another word that sounded like *cow* which could help him.

He replied, “*Ciao!*”

Not this time!

### E-response

**Denise Zahrn**  
**Reading Recovery Teacher**  
**Paris, Illinois**

Brittnay was reading her alphabet book recently and got to the *W w* page with a picture of a witch. She read out in a loud, clear voice, “*Ww dot com.*” Those big brown eyes got bigger than ever when she realized what she had said.

We both got a good laugh out of that one!

### Reading Recovery apprentice

**Laurie Ortiz**  
**Reading Recovery Teacher**  
**Hope, Michigan**

During a lesson toward the end of her program, Naomi shared that she would like to be a Reading Recovery teacher just like me, and she wanted me to train her. Later, as I was finishing a lesson with my last Reading Recovery student, the first grade teacher and principal came in to tell me that when Naomi was being read to by her sixth grade reading buddy, she thought it was necessary to take a running record of his reading! After hearing this and seeing the running record Naomi had taken, I went to find her.

As soon as I walked in, Naomi saw me, smiled a huge smile, and said, “I told you: I’m going to be a Reading Recovery teacher!”

### Making a connection

**Paula Riley**  
**Reading Recovery Teacher**  
**Pasadena, Maryland**

One of my students was reading the book *Shark in a Sack* (Level 4, Wright Group). After reading the page with the words, “Can you put a pig in a pan?” she looked at me and declared, “Then you’d have bacon!”

I thought that was pretty smart thinking!

### Teacher or facilitator?

**Joy Ballenger**  
**Reading Recovery Teacher Leader**  
**Spartanburg, South Carolina**

I was walking down the hall with Shante, a little girl who had reached the criteria for discontinuing from Reading Recovery.

“Shante,” I said, “you are a great reader and you are ready to graduate. Soon, I won’t be coming to get you every day and teach you anymore.”

Shante questioned with a shocked expression, “You a teacher???”

I said, “Shante, what do you think we have been doing every day when you come to Reading Recovery?”

“Ms. B., you’re my friend. We read books, write and talk. You don’t *teach!*”

“But you’ve learned so much,” I explained.

Shante concluded, “You helped me learn stuff for *myself*; that’s more fun anyway.”